Policy Brief

COVID-19 Learning LOSS and RECOVERY
in Primary and Secondary Schools in Bangladesh

This policy brief has taken into account the circumstances surrounding learning setbacks in the Bangladeshi school education system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as recognized in various national and international reports, including Education Watch Study 2022. It has also incorporated insights from the Education Watch Study 2023, aiming to assess the dropout among specific groups of students between 2020 and 2022, tracking their present status, family expenditures on education, and strategies for addressing learning gaps. These insights have been drawn from survey data complemented by secondary sources. Furthermore, the policy brief has underscored the importance of pragmatic measures that policymakers and decision-makers must undertake to address the demands of stakeholders in a fluid situation.

Introduction

Bangladesh's anticipated transition from a Least Developed Country (LDC) to a non-LDC developing country by 2026 signifies a noteworthy milestone in its development journey. The nation has set ambitious objectives, with the goal of achieving upper-middle-income country status by 2031 and aspiring to attain the developed nation status by 2041. These aspirations underscore the nation's commitment to fostering sustainable socio-economic development, aligning with international development objectives, and exemplifying its dedication to enhancing the well-being of its citizens.

The formal education system of Bangladesh encompasses approximately 150,000 institutions, catering to 40 million students and supported by a teaching workforce exceeding one million educators. Around 19 million students are enrolled in primary education, and twelve million are at the secondary level, including government-recognized madrasahs. Various initiatives have been implemented to enhance basic education, such as the Primary

- *Around 150,000 educational institutions*
- *Approx 40 million enrolled students.*
- *Net Enrollment Rate (NER) – 97.56%, Dropout- 13.95% at the primary level.*
- *Net Enrollment Rate (NER) – 73.76%, Dropout- 35.98% at the secondary level*

Education Development Program (PEDP) 1, PEDP2, PEDP3, and the ongoing efforts of PEDP4, as well as the Secondary Education Development Program, reflecting a steadfast commitment to achieving quality education for all.

The outcomes of these education efforts are evident in the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) of 97.56% and a dropout rate of 13.95% in primary education. At the secondary level, the NER stands at 73.76%, with a dropout rate of 35.98%, as reported in the Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022. One-year pre-primary education was introduced in primary schools in 2015, and a pilot program of two-year pre-primary education for children aged 4 and above commenced in 3,000 primary schools in 2023.

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However, the quality of education and learning outcomes have not kept pace with the expanding access to school education. The 7th round of the National Student Assessment at the primary level in 2022 revealed that approximately half of the children cannot read "at their grade level," and two-thirds cannot perform basic counting after completing five years of primary education. This learning deficit at the foundational level is consistent with the World Bank's estimate of 58% "learning poverty" rate, defined as children aged 10-14 years who are unable to read and count.

Impact of COVID-19 on education

The consequences of the 2020-21 pandemic was devastating and multi-faceted, compounding low resilience to shock with already low learning outcomes and high dropout. The most vulnerable children, particularly those unable to access remote learning, faced the risk of not returning to the classroom, being compelled into child marriage or child labor. School closures in Bangladesh, spanning from March 2020 to September 2021 and again in February 2022, disrupted the education of approximately 37 million school children. These closures also worsened existing gaps in basic literacy and numeracy skills prior to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021).

Estimates from the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO suggest that the pandemic's consequences may have elevated the learning poverty rate to around 70 percent in low- and middle-income countries. A study by the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit (BEDU) of the Dhaka Education Board indicated that 80 percent of class-VIII students exhibited

> *80% of class-VIII students exhibited significant learning gaps in Bangla, the primary language for most students, compared to the expected level competency.*

significant learning gaps in Bangla, the primary language for most students, compared to the expected grade level competency. Similar gaps were observed in English, affecting 76 percent of students, and in Mathematics, affecting 69 percent of students, according to an NCTB study for class V, IV, and III students.

72% in English, and 65% in Mathematics (Table 1). It is important to note that the same question paper was utilized for both classes.

The digital divide in Bangladesh became a critical issue during the pandemic, exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities. Various studies indicated that the lack of access to
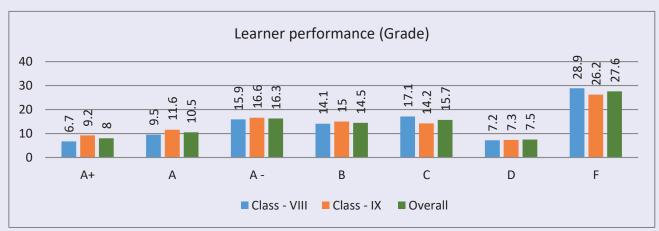
Figure 1. Performance in the assessment of class 8 and 9 - Education Watch Study 2022

Learner performance (Grade)

Grade	Class - VIII	Class - IX	Overall
A+	6.7	9.2	8
A	9.5	11.6	10.5
A -	15.9	16.6	16.3
B	14.1	15	14.5
C	17.1	14.2	15.7
D	7.2	7.3	7.5
F	28.9	26.2	27.6

The Education Watch 2022 study revealed that 29% of a sample of class VIII students and 26% of class IX failed to achieve the pass mark of 33 out of 100 in a moderately pitched test based on the class VIII syllabus for Bangla, English, and Mathematics. Combining these percentages with those receiving D grades (33 – 39 marks) showed that those obtaining these very low scores of below 40 constituted 36% for class VIII and 33.5% for class IX (Figure 1). It also highlighted a high dependence on private tutors or coaching, with 85% for class VIII and IX students.

Table 1. Subject-wise student performance – Education Watch Study 2022

Class/Grade	Subject	Pass (33 and above Marks)	Fail (0-32 Marks)
Class VIII	Bangla	82.0	18.0
	English	65.3	34.7
	Math	66.0	34.0
	Overall	71.1	28.9
Class IX	Bangla	83.7	16.3
	English	71.7	28.3
	Math	65.9	34.1
	Overall	73.8	26.2

In the subject-wise performance of Class VIII students, 82% achieved a passing score of 33% or higher in Bangla, 65% in English, and 66% in Mathematics. The performance of Class IX students differs slightly from that of Class VIII. Among Class IX students, 84% passed in Bangla,

digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and the level of digital literacy among students intensified educational inequalities, particularly impacting marginalized communities. Education has now become a matter of how much a family can pay, resembling a commodity in the market. Consequently, education has evolved into an instrument for further widening the growing inequality prevailing in society.

Recovery initiatives

When the pandemic struck, the government promptly responded by closing schools and initiating a transition to distance learning. Utilizing television, mobile, radio, and internet platforms, the response included forming working groups involving government, development partners, and NGO entities. These groups were tasked with developing and delivering remote learning content, although debates persisted regarding their effectiveness. Simultaneously, public examinations were postponed or cancelled at primary and secondary levels, with syllabuses shortened. Vaccination drives were launched to safeguard post-primary level children.

Concurrently, a COVID-19 Response Plan for the Education Sector was expeditiously developed in consultation with the leadership of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and the Ministry of Education (MOE), with support from UNICEF. Despite proposing strategies and interventions to address the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on the school education sector, the plan faced challenges due to insufficient funding and a lack of a systematic implementation plan. The Education Watch 2022 report revealed that teachers acknowledged additional classes taken by students to cope with their lessons after school reopening. However, a significant percentage of students (71% at the primary level and 75% at the secondary level) did not receive any special assistance for their lessons post-pandemic.

The pandemic-induced learning loss and its potential long-term consequences on children's educational attainment have been underestimated. Authorities, concerned about returning to the normal school routine, including public examinations, expressed eagerness to proceed with a major curricular reform for school education, delayed due to closures.

Way Forward: Priority Policy Measures

Below are recommendations, addressed to education policy-makers and decision-makers, regarding policies and strategies to overcome the post-pandemic consequences on children's learning and move forward with recovery and renewal.

1. Bringing Back the Dropout and the Excluded

To address disparities in basic education, a comprehensive approach is crucial. Key efforts should focus on tracking and understanding dropout causes and bringing back and supporting students. This entails:

- Extend stipends and targeted financial aid to alleviate barriers for returning students.
- Remove provisions discriminating against married girls, ensuring equal access to stipends.
- Provide extra academic support, supplementing regular teachers with local volunteers for returning students.
- Establish effective communication with parents to enhance their involvement.
- Form partnerships with local education NGOs to mobilize support.
- Develop upazila and school-specific plans with education NGOs, local government, and teachers' organizations.
- Ensure budgets/resources available to schools/upazila levels, facilitating partnerships with education NGOs.

2. Meeting Post-pandemic Learning Challenges

To address learning lags and implement recovery measures, coordinated policies at central, local, and school levels are essential. Key elements include:

- Assess students against benchmarks for core subjects at primary and secondary levels.
- Develop a simple tool to assess learning lag, train selected teachers on its usage, and organize remedial learning.
- Group students based on severity of lag, providing necessary support, including extra classes.
- Employ local volunteer teachers in collaboration with education NGOs to enhance teaching-learning capacity.
- Allocate budgets and resources to schools for dropout recovery plans.
- Use ICT-based learning to enhance teacher skills and support students in the learning recovery and renewal effort.

3. Providing Support and Incentives for Teachers

To address teacher workload and shortages, a policy should be adopted to compensate and incentivize extra work, potentially involving volunteer teachers. Key steps include:

- Assess the teacher's role and workload for recovery and remedial activities, including bringing back dropouts, addressing learning lags, and engaging with parents.
- Offer financial incentives to teachers for additional tasks such as extra classes, parent communication, home visits, and additional training.
- Employ local volunteers, selected and supervised in partnership with local NGOs, to assist teachers in their additional activities.

4. Improving Classroom Learning Management and Teacher Autonomy

In order to address the issue of improving classroom learning management and teacher autonomy, attention is needed to the longstanding pedagogy problems of the school system including the skills, motivation, professional development and support for teachers and the conditions in classroom and school for teachers to perform. Key steps include:

- Allow flexible time management and lesson planning for teachers in classroom, moving away from rigid centarlly prescribed time-slots to promote effective teaching and active student engagement for more dynamic and interactive teaching-learning experiences.

- Provide orientation and support to teachers to exercise autonomy in the classroom, faciliating effective leaning and students' engagement. Empower teachers to make instructional decisions tailors to their students' needs for enhencing overall qualitu of education delivery.

- Channel larger investments into expanding the blended learning approach, encompassing connectivity, hardware, digital learning content, maintenance, technical support, and teacher preparation to mediate between technology and learners.

5. Family Support and Mitigation of Their Economic Burden

Addressing the escalating costs, especially private tutoring and commercial guidebooks, along with various school fees, is crucial to alleviating the burden on families and reducing disparities in educational opportunities. Key steps include:

- Track and monitor classroom activities, collaborating with parents and teachers, to discourage reliance on private tutoring and memorization guidebooks.

- Provide additional lessons and support for students falling behind in their studies.

- Control and eliminate both formal and informal fees charged by schools.

- Introduce and expand school meals in primary schools and provide subsidized nutritious meals at the secondary level with public budget support.

6. Promoting ICT-based Learning and the 'Blended Approach'

Investments in ICT-based learning and multimedia devices aim to engage students through distance learning during pandemic-induced school closures. While the blended approach, combining distance and in-person modes with teacher mediation, shows promise, current investments and training have yet to yield the desired results. To enhance the blended approach, specific measures are required:

- Move towards a more coordinated and systematic approach towards introducing technology-based blended learning. Implement better planning that integrates hands-on teacher preparation, digital content aligned with the curriculum, and connectivity. Ensure appropriate hardware and technical support for system maintenance, aiming for improved learning outcomes.

7. Matching School and Teacher Capacity-Building with Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment Reform

To effectively implement the anticipated transformative reforms, schools, teachers,

students, and parents need to be thoroughly prepared and supported. Urgent steps include:

- Appoint a committee of experts and practitioners, involving both teachers and some individuals not directly engaged in the current initiative to undertake a rapid assessment. The objective should be to identify the challenges and steps to deal with these in implementing the proposed pedagogy and assessment approaches.

- Based on the committee's findings, concerned authorities need to make necessary adjustments in pedagogy, student assessment, teacher and school support, supervision, articulation, continuity of curricular content among grades, and parent involvement.

- Adjust the rollout timetable, considering 2024 as a period for learning and reflection to ensure a more effective and smooth implementation.

8. Enabling policies and actions at the national level

To facilitate the recommended actions at school, community, and local levels, a supportive policy framework and national-level decisions are imperative. These policies should have strong political backing and encompass:

- Provide larger public budgetary support to schools, addressing the costs of additional activities and alleviating the economic burden on less affluent families. Reversing the downward trend in real terms of public education resources is crucial, allocating resources based on school enrollment.

- Adopt a national-level policy decision to encourage teachers greater autonomy and flexibility in managing lessons and learning time within the curriculum. Schools and teachers demonstrating better outcomes should be granted higher authority and responsibility in school and classroom.

- Reconsider policies and the mindset of policy-makers that hinder fostering partnerships between the government and non-state actors, including education NGOs, in order to promote collaborative activities outlined in the recommendations.

- Prioritize, within the "Digital Bangladesh" and "Smart Bangladesh" policy framework, the expansion of connectivity, hardware, digital content, ICT-based learning, and the blended approach. Measures may include free Wi-Fi hotspots in educational institutions, subsidized devices and internet connections for students, and collaboration with private sector technology and digital service providers to widely promote ICT-based learning.

The future of the new generation and the nation hinges on decisive and forward-looking leadership in the education sector. Initiating and leading a mega-program for comprehensive and coordinated education transformation is imperative. Two initial steps to support the proposed measures are consolidating the oversight of the education system under one Ministry (with various divisions) and establishing a permanent statutory education commission as envisioned in Education Policy 2010. A concurrent leadership agenda should be to safeguard education institutions and personnel decisions from partisan political interference.

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